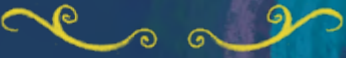




Texas, 1928

Eleven-year-old James is struggling to find his purpose in life. With his father struck dead by lightning and his mother in jail, he's haunted by rumors that his family is cursed. He finds a friend in Paul, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, and together, they battle the school bully. But James's life is turned upside-down yet again when he uncovers a family secret involving his beloved grandmother. His discovery leads him to find the sense of purpose he's been seeking.





WHEN LIGHTNING' STROCK



Betsy R. Rosenthal

KAR-BEN
PUBLISHING

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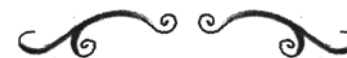
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For my grandparents—Samuel and Minnie Paul
and Abel and Frieda Rosenthal, immigrants from
Russia and Lithuania all

That which is hateful to you,
do not do to another.

—Hillel



Chapter 1 Fightin' and All

“Your family’s got a curse on it!” Virgil hollered at me outside the schoolhouse after Miss Pritchert rang the bell. If anyone was cursed, it was Virgil. He was about as smart as a bag of rocks and as pretty as an old man’s toenails.

I balled up my hand in a fist. “The only curse my family has on it is the curse of havin’ to live in the same town as your family,” I said.

Virgil swiped his greasy black hair away from his face and glared at me outta the dark caves where his eyes were hiding. “You’re gonna wish you hadn’t said that!” he yelled and popped one on my left cheek. That’s when a whole circle of kids started gathering around us.

I clutched my aching cheek and covered my face

so the other kids couldn't see the tears blinding me. Then Virgil pushed me so hard he knocked me down. Along with everyone jeering and yelling stuff, I heard Virgil's sidekick Margaret shouting, "Get him, Virgil!"

Virgil kicked me while I was lying on the hard ground. My cheek smarted and now the back of my head hurt too. Around me it sounded like one giant chant with a mess of different voices until I could make out one voice, deeper than the rest.

"Get up, James. You not listen to them." Lucky for me, it was my best friend, Paul Gudovich. Well, I suppose it was easy to have a best friend when you only got one friend.

Next thing I knew, his strong arms were helping me to my feet. "Come. Let's go from here," he said.

The circle of kids parted around us like the Red Sea. Even though he was only a couple of years older than me, Paul was a giant compared to the rest of us kids, especially me.

But Paul being so tall didn't stop Virgil none from spitting out, "Looky here, it's the dumb Russian giant come to rescue the lightnin' boy midget."

I held my throbbing cheek and sorta leaned on Paul as we walked away from Virgil and his posse. Soon as we were on the path, hidden by the mesquite

trees, I sat myself down in the dirt and let go of some of the tears I was holding in.

"Vow, Virgil popped you good this time," Paul said, looking down at me. "What will your grandfather say?"

"Don't worry about Pappy," I said. "He probably won't be sore at me once I tell him that I didn't even throw a punch. You know he don't want me to fight. That's the only reason I didn't squash Virgil."

Paul lifted the corner of his mouth a little. That was the most smiling I ever got from him. "You are sure you would be the one winning such a fight?" he asked. I guess Paul knew me pretty good, even though he hadn't known me for long.

I never heard anybody speak as slowly as Paul did. It was like he was playing a game of hide-and-seek with words inside his head every time he talked. And his accent sure announced to everybody that he wasn't from these parts. I reckoned he'd start sounding like a Texan soon enough, though.

"You walk okay?" he said. "If no, I go bring your grandfather."

I stood up. My legs were working fine. It was my head that was hurting. And my pride even more. "I'm okay," I said. "Let's go."

We followed the path through the mesquite trees. They were about the only things growing in Odessa on account of the dirt was fulla sand and it was so dang dry. It was hard to find any kinda shade anywhere, and even though it was September, I was sweating up a storm.

“You wanna stop on the way and go swimmin’ at Perkins’ pond?” I asked Paul. I was a whole lot keener on cooling off than having to explain my aching cheek to Pappy.

“Is not good idea. You need something for cheek right now. We get you to your grandfather.” I reckoned he was right, so we kept going till we passed Elbert Heath’s field and got to Ridgely’s, my pappy’s diner, which was plumb next door to our house.

“Thanks for helping me out, Paul,” I said.

“You be okay?” he asked.

“Sure. See ya tomorrow at school.” I gave him a slap on the back. I wished Paul coulda stayed and we coulda worked on our history homework together, but I had to go face Pappy. And I figured he’d be kinda suspicious of Paul. Pappy didn’t trust most newcomers—like Paul’s family, who came here all the way from Russia not too long ago. Pappy suspected anybody finding their way to

our town might have something to hide. Odessa was so far out west in Texas that folks liked to say it wasn’t quite the end of the world, but you could see it from here.

The bell tinkled when I opened the diner door, which made it impossible to sneak in. My nose told me Pappy was making Ridgely burgers. He said it was his very own recipe and claimed you couldn’t find them anywhere else. He took the ends of the Pullman bread loaves that we couldn’t use for sandwiches and soaked them in water and mixed the wet bread ends with some meat. Then he patted the mixture into little hamburgers. The best part was the smell of the frying onions with paprika that he poured over the burgers in the pan.

I expected Pappy would give me a talking-to, but I was sure he’d give me a Ridgely burger too.

“What happened to you, Butch?” he said, looking up from his pan of onions.

“Got in a fight at school. I didn’t touch him, Pappy, I swear. I just fought with my words, like you taught me.”

He went back to the giant icebox and pulled out a cold, pink rib eye steak. “Here, put this on that cheek and tell me the whole story.”

That's one thing I sure liked about Pappy. He'd give you a good listen before he'd tell you what's what.

"I was defendin' the family honor," I said. "Virgil Jackson insulted us. You can't blame a man for not sittin' on his hands while someone's bad-mouthing your family, can you?"

"Maybe not, but I believe your best bet would be to avoid that boy entirely. Virgil Jackson's not worth your time. God put you on this earth for better things, James Ridgely."

"What are those better things, Pappy?"

"I believe each one of us has some kinda purpose on this earth. Your job is to find out what your purpose is, Butch."

I sure wished my abuela—my grandmother—were still alive. I was certain she coulda helped me find my purpose.